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Turning their Fey Shoulders to the Wheel: Edwin Morgan's letters to Hamish Henderson

Greg Thomas

In his introduction to *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, published in 2012, Alec Finlay places his father's early 1960s poetry in the context of a loose-knit band of allies bound together by estrangement from certain established figures within the Scottish literary community:

Together with his friend the poet and folk-singer Hamish Henderson, and the Glaswegian poet Edwin Morgan, Finlay helped shape a Scottish avant-garde that was oddly homely, less a programmatic movement than a fey shoulder pressed against the wheel of the moribund Scottish Renaissance.¹

The need for younger Scottish poets to strike out in new directions from the increasingly obstinate course ploughed by the advocates of that Renaissance – exemplified by the exclusion of many of them from the 1958 Burns bicentenary anthology *Honour'd Shade* – has in the last few years been fairly extensively emphasised. Indeed, the danger should be avoided of lumping together largely distinct developments in Scottish literature during the late 1950s to early 1960s in terms of the common hostility meted out on them by Hugh MacDiarmid, whose name often serves as a metonym for Scottish Renaissance principles.

To some extent, Morgan's concrete poetry and Henderson's folk balladry represent two of these distinct developments. Nonetheless, what this selection of ten letters from Morgan to Henderson partly reveals – although their limited number perhaps proves Finlay correct in precluding any suggestion of a 'programmatic movement' – are some instinctive assumptions of common ground. Predictably, MacDiarmid's name bobs around, and the two younger poets do seem partly drawn together by a fascination, tinged with both anger and adulation, with

the older poet's idiosyncrasies of authorship and character. However, other overlaps of interest, experience and personality can be inferred.

Morgan sets the correspondence up on Henderson's turf. 'Dear Hamish Henderson,' he writes, on 25 March 1958:

I have been stumped by a request from a literary friend in London [...] This chap is very anxious to have the words (and music too if possible) of the Highland Brigade ballad McCAFFERTY (about the Jock whose wife was seduced by a Seaforth [Highlanders] officer whom he then killed) [...] I'd be much obliged if you can pass on (or refer me to) the words of this song [...] Perhaps this is one of the ditties I missed by being in the RAMC! [Royal Army Medical Corps].

To some degree then, it would appear Morgan respected Henderson as an authority and arbiter of taste on matters folkloric. Notably, the two surviving poems which Morgan sent Henderson are both loosely ballad-like in form: 'The Song of the Child' (1971) and 'The Koestler Chair' (1985). The former is quite well-known, the latter a piece of comic doggerel on the Koestlers' bequest for a parapsychology unit in a British University, eventually set up at Edinburgh: 'don't tell me it's only a thesis/That stones can travel by telekinesis', etcetera. The first is even inscribed with the message 'For your ballad collection!' These are comic poems, and this is a joke, of course, but Morgan seems to have been quietly ambitious for his work, and might have half-seriously been seeking approval.

When he writes again on 8 March 1959, making sceptical reference to the folk singer Robin Hall's recent rendition of a Burns song, Morgan again seems to be seeking Henderson's judgement, this time on the issue of adaptation and interpretation in the folk scene:

Hall has turned [...] 'Rantin rovin Robin' from an erotic into a political song, by omitting the last verse (which of course is common enough in *douce company*), and by changing 'our kin' [kind] (i.e. women) into 'mankind' in the penultimate! I know ballads are fluid, but I don't approve of this kind of tinkering, do you?

In fact, Henderson might well have. As Corey Gibson notes:

Henderson's conviction in the survival of folksong rests on a concept of the folk 'process' which gives primary agency to the songs and their singers. With the sharing of songs comes a freedom of artistic licence and interpretation which can only promote the diffusion of folksong.²

Articles of Henderson's like 'Rock and Reel' (1958) reflect a relatedly benevolent attitude to the dissemination of folk music in popular culture, with which Hall was also associable for his folk performances on BBC television. There was also a personal connection: Timothy Neat's biography notes that Henderson mentored Hall, whose folk career began at Glasgow School of Art.³

A letter sent two decades later opens discussion out from the folk process into a comparison between the permutation of song format over time and the use of quotation and collage in experimental poetry: a possible nexus between the two poets' interests. Writing on 9 September 1978, in reference to Henderson's recent article on MacDiarmid in *The Edinburgh City Lynx* ('The Langholm Byspale') Morgan states: 'I [...] found the comments on links between the 'found' poems and folk 'appropriation' particularly interesting – there's something there that could well be investigated further.' The article itself exemplifies the kind of ambivalent fascination MacDiarmid aroused in poets of Henderson and Morgan's generation:

The thing which the later farraginous encyclopaedic poems and the exquisitely structured early lyrics like "The Watergaw", "Moonstruck", and "The Eemis Stane" do have in common is their dexterous lifting of words or passages from a heterogeneous variety of sources – including of course, 'anon' [...] This acquisitive attitude to material from all sorts of sources is [s]trongly reminiscent of the techniques of the folk poet, who frequently appropriates lines or even whole stanzas from other poems or songs [...] it is one of the greatest ironies of modern literature that MacDiarmid – who often, like Burns, makes the impression of a folk poet 'writ large' – became a remorseless antagonist of the present folk revival[.]⁴

Morgan's interest in that link perhaps reflected his own composition of 'found poems' throughout the 1970s; a 1995 *Edinburgh Review* article, 'Recycling, Mosaic and Collage', finally gets round to 'further investigation' on the matter, although sadly the folk connection is eschewed. Morgan traces the modern artistic phenomenon of re-representation and re-writing from Andy Warhol's sale of self-signed lithographs of *The Scream* to William Burroughs' cut-ups, Jackson MacLow's permutations and, of course, MacDiarmid.

'[D]o such provocative interlockings of past and present point to anything as glib as 'the death of the author'?', the 1995 article asks.⁵ 'Any single borrowing by such a committed borrower as MacDiarmid ought to be placed in the broader context of his lengthy poems, where he is able to impose, on what is a cento of quotations, the unmistakable sense of his own style.'⁶ Besides a circumspection regarding Barthes, this suggests that for Morgan, the act of re-framing was, at least in MacDiarmid's case, sufficient creative intervention to ward off charges off plagiarism.

At other times, his attitude seems less generous; the issue of MacDiarmid's possible plagiarism, relevant to both younger poets, surfaces in Morgan's letter of 13 February 1965, which opens by querying the authorship of 'The Little White Rose':

I was interested in what you said about 'The rose of all the world'. When I first read this poem I was sure it was something I had read before, but I have never managed to track it down. I'm pretty certain, however, that it isn't MacDiarmid's own work. If you ever do find out the original I'd like very much to know! I suspect a great deal of his poetry is unacknowledged quotation – especially in the long poems. I had an article in NOTES & QUERIES about a long passage in 'In Memoriam James Joyce' which was taken with no acknowledgement from Sherrington's book MAN ON HIS NATURE. Someday this will all have to be sorted out.

The note might have hit a sore spot for Henderson. According to Neat, 'In Memoriam' makes use, amongst other things, of 'numerous 'ideas' brought to MacDiarmid by Hamish.'⁷ Similar feelings might have been

stoked by Morgan's earlier reference to Robin Hall, Henderson seemingly having had more pragmatic reasons in 1958 for disgruntlement with Hall's treatment of traditional songs, including songs which he, Henderson, had "discovered". 'On a philosophical level, Hamish felt the copyrighting of traditional material was a nonsense', Neat states, adding slightly euphemistically 'but money, reputation and the law are facts of modern life'.⁸ Neat then quotes a wounded rebuke from Hall (10 November 1958) to an apparently angry attempt from Henderson to extract royalties for some of the songs he was performing: '[d]o you really think I have become some crummy 'Tin Pan alley' bastard who goes about stealing songs from friends I USED TO HAVE[?]'⁹ For Henderson too then, the processes of quotation and re-interpretation – in folk and poetry – had their ethical (and legal) limits.

If the poetic collagist, like the folk musician, sometimes trod the boundaries of copyism, Morgan's letter of 10 July 1966 reveals the equal scepticism he and Henderson shared regarding some more conventional methods of narration, specifically in historical writing. Morgan is responding to Henderson's article 'Glencoe on our Minds' (1966), a critical review of various narrative accounts of the massacre, particularly that of the popular historian John Prebble, in which Henderson finds 'imaginative reconstructions [...] run to seed':¹⁰

I enjoyed the Glencoe article and although I haven't read Prebble's book yet I am sure that judging from his earlier things you are right! [...] When he began his book on the Clearances 'Mr Macleod of Geanies was "much fatigued" this Sunday morning,' one knew what to expect – I quite agree with you that this is the bad old way to write history [...] it's useless doing this sort of thing on description alone; we've got beyond that stage.

Morgan's comments bring to mind the two authors' poetic responses to a shared trauma of their own, and another shared source of identity: the Second World War. Both Henderson's 'Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica' (1948) and Morgan's 'The New Divan' (1977) jettison the glib descriptive narration of which Henderson accuses Prebble for techniques of mosaic or quotation, although the effect is more exaggerated in Morgan's huge, aphasic sequence. In Henderson's case

the style has been called Eliotic; in Morgan's, the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafiz, with his divan-like patchworks of stories, is the stated source. But in both cases, it seems partly to reflect suspicion regarding the possibility of direct reportage of such momentous, multi-faceted events.

The war is only directly raised once in Morgan's letters – excepting that aside about his time in the Royal Army Medical Corps – in a postcard sent on 14 July 1985. 'Thanks for sending my 'North Africa' poem to Victor Selwyn', he begins, presumably referring to Selwyn's 1985 anthology *Poems of the Second World War*, in which Henderson features but Morgan does not:

Unlike you, I took a long time to get round to writing about these things! But isn't it strange, so many Scottish poets being out there? Half of them still around – half of them descended to Amenti!

Eulogising dead poets by reference to the Egyptian underworld, Morgan perhaps playfully hints at Henderson's eighth elegy, 'Karnak', suffused with references to pharaonic mythology. Though the letter is not terribly revealing, James McGonigal's biography of Morgan yields speculation that Morgan saw his and Henderson's wartime experiences in North Africa and the Middle East as further grounds for assumed camaraderie. McGonigal notes that one of the last books Morgan devoured was Henderson's own biography, and that Morgan homed in on the war passages, struck by 'the amount of sheer action and leadership Henderson had shown in the North African and Italian campaigns, so unlike his own war experience'.¹¹

Another possible source of empathy forged in adversity was their common connections to gay or bisexual culture, though these were seemingly more unambiguous and genuine in Morgan's case. Referring again to Henderson's biography, McGonigal notes that besides 'focusing on the outline of the *Honour'd Shade* controversy', Morgan was struck by Norman MacCaig's 'public mockery of Henderson for his homosexual or bisexual identity, which was rumoured at the time', and by Henderson's fascination with the Horseman's Word society, which

Morgan shared, and which, according to McGonigal, Alec Finlay had speculated was a way of alluding to queer identity.¹² In a 1999 BBC radio interview – a recording can be found in the Scottish Poetry Library's Edwin Morgan Archive – Morgan described his own suspicions of MacCaig's homophobia as one factor in determining his decision not to come out until his old age:

I think some [poets] would not have been all that sympathetic. Norman MacCaig, I think, would not have been all that sympathetic if I'd told him [...] I'd heard him make remarks about other people who were homosexual which were not that sympathetic [...] he possibly came round.¹³

The letters, however, are predictably silent on this issue.

While this group of letters between Morgan and Henderson is relatively modest, what is worth re-emphasising is the recurrent appearance of MacDiarmid throughout. Morgan and Henderson were different poets in many ways, but the curiously engrossing quality MacDiarmid's work and character seems to have possessed for both is perhaps ultimately what binds this correspondence together, a patchwork of letters which, for this reason and others, is worth picking apart.

Notes:

¹ Alec Finlay, 'Introduction: Picking the Last Wild Flower', in *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, ed. by Alec Finlay (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 1-61 (p. 20).

² Corey Gibson, 'Tomorrow, songs / Will flow free again, and new voices / Be born on the carrying stream': Hamish Henderson's Conception of the Scottish Folk-song Revival and its Place in Literary Scotland', *The Drouth*, 32 (2009), 48-59, (p.50).

³ Timothy Neat, *Hamish Henderson: A Biography, Volume 2: Poetry Becomes People* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2009), pp. 123-124.

⁴ Hamish Henderson, 'Hugh MacDiarmid: The Langholm Byspale', in *The Edinburgh City Lynx* (21 Sept.-4 Oct. 1978), 22-23 (p. 23).

⁵ Edwin Morgan, 'Recycling, Mosaic and Collage', in *Edinburgh Review*, 93 (1995), 149-166 (p. 152).

⁶ Morgan, p. 153.

⁷ Neat, p. 145.

⁸ Neat, p. 125.

⁹ Neat, p. 125.

¹⁰ Hamish Henderson, 'Glencoe on our Minds', in *Alias MacAlias*, ed. by Alec Finlay, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), pp. 257-262 (p.258) (first publ. in truncated form in *The Scotsman*, 25 June 1966).

¹¹ James McGonigal, *Beyond the Last Dragon: A Life of Edwin Morgan* (Dingwall: Sandstone, 2010), p. 336.

¹² McGonigal, pp. 335-336.

¹³ Cassette reproduction of the radio programme 'Edi Stark meets Edwin Morgan', BBC Radio Scotland, 29 December 1999; Edinburgh, Scottish Poetry Library, Edwin Morgan Archive, EMA01/112/05.